



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects the unique qualities of his or her project. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/fellowships.html> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Gender, Conversion and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean

Institution: Brigham Young University

Project Director: Eric Dursteler

Grant Program: Fellowships

## Gender, Conversion and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean

In recent years scholars have been drawn to the fascinating and little studied experience of the renegades, Christians who embraced Islam and in doing so crossed perhaps the most elemental and significant of all early modern boundaries: that of religion. While the phenomenon of conversion dates from the earliest stages of the Christian/Muslim encounter, in the Mediterranean the early modern era represents its heyday. Some scholars have estimated that in this period Christian renegades in the Mediterranean may have numbered over 300,000. Muslim men and women also converted to Christianity, though in much smaller numbers, and to this point this reverse renegade phenomenon has been very little studied.

The scholarship on renegades has cast light onto an aspect of the early modern world previously all but overlooked, and is suggestive both because of its insights into the complex nature of cultural interactions in this time and place, as well as its insights into questions of identity. To this point, however, the bulk of this work has focused almost entirely on the experiences of renegade men; women, who crossed religious frontiers in lesser, but not insignificant numbers, have been generally ignored. This lacuna raises a number of important questions: Were women's motivations to cross boundaries different from men's? What was the experience of these renegade women in the Islamic world, and how did it differ from that of men? What place did religion have in Mediterranean women's identity? And what of Muslim and Jewish "renegade" women who crossed these boundaries in the opposite direction, and converted to Christianity? In short, what was the experience of "women on the margins" between East and West?

At present we do not have satisfactory answers to these questions. This is partly a problem of sources: renegade scholarship has been based almost entirely on inquisitorial records, and men appear disproportionately in these documents. This is because male renegades outnumbered female, but also women seem in general to have been less likely and less able to return to their birth religion. This was due to ties to children and spouses in their adopted homes, and in part to social, political and cultural limits on their ability to move and act independently once they were established in Islamic lands. Thus women's experiences appear more infrequently in inquisitorial records, which in the main treat only those renegades who sought readmittance to the Christian community. If we rely solely on these sources, the experiences of women who

permanently left their birthplaces, their families and their religions, are forever lost to us. One of the great challenges, then, in broadly recreating the lives of women renegades is finding viable documentary sources that treat the full range of women's experiences. These must include women who returned to Christianity, those who never did, and Muslim and Jewish women who converted to Christianity willingly (in contrast to the forced conversions of the Moriscos in Spain).

The challenges in studying renegade women are part of what makes this project significant. I have been fortunate to identify a number of cases of women who passed from Christianity to Islam (or in the opposite direction), and never returned to their birth religions. The stories of these women come not from Inquisition records, but from the notarial registers of the Venetian community in Constantinople, from the diplomatic correspondence of Venice's ambassadors to the Ottoman sultans, as well as from brief references spread throughout a range of other official documents from the region. The richness of these documentary sources has allowed me to develop three detailed narratives of women who crossed early modern religious boundaries.

The first case is that of Fatima Cadun, née Beatrice Michiel. Born in Venice, she left two sons and a second marriage in 1591 and traveled to Constantinople where her brother occupied one of the highest positions in the Porte. Her decision to leave Venice was in part motivated by her second husband's attempts to control land and office holdings she held in Venice. A more compelling motivation, however, was the possibility that transgressing this boundary could benefit her and her sons through associating themselves more closely with her powerful brother power. Indeed, once in Constantinople, she used her position in her new home to arrange offices and other sources of income in Venice for her sons, and to arrange a favorable marriages for her sons.

The second case is of Suor Deodata, born Elena Cievalelli. She was the niece of another powerful renegade, a Dalmatian nobleman who converted to Islam in the late sixteenth century. In Constantinople, he rose to a position of authority and used his influence to benefit and convert other family members, including Deodata's father. The two men arranged a marriage for the young girl with an important Ottoman official, and tried to compel her to agree to the match. Instead, she fled her home and entered a Venetian convent to avoid both abandoning her birth faith and accepting an unwanted marriage.

The final case study is of four Muslim women from the Aegean island of Milos. One of the women was married to the

island's kadi (judge), but became dissatisfied by his long absences and his financial and emotional neglect. Eventually, she, her mother and two sisters abandoned her husband, and fled to Corfu. There they all converted to Christianity, the mother entered a convent, and the sisters were quickly promised in marriage. This case is of particular interest because it provides insight into the experience of Muslim women using boundaries in a fashion similar to that of Christian renegade women, and suggests a model in which gender may transcend political, cultural and religious differences.

These unusually detailed cases suggest tentative answers to the questions I have posed about the character of women's experiences on the margins of the Mediterranean. To this point my research indicates that women's experiences in navigating society's boundaries were often significantly different from their male counterparts. The decision to traverse political and religious borders was taken independently by the women themselves, often in the face of significant opposition from authorities, family and friends. Women's motivations also differed: in each of my case studies, the women were involved in complex, fairly common, familial situations which were unique to them - problems with abusive and financially grasping or neglectful husbands, or with parents trying to impose undesirable marriages. In response to these situations, these women used the boundary between Islam and Christianity instrumentally, as a means to escape their difficult positions by physically uprooting, but even more by refashioning themselves. They did this to improve their personal, social and economic lot, and to benefit their children. By manipulating and crossing political, but especially religious boundaries in the liminal space between East and West, these women were able to subvert structures of social control, and to assert a degree of agency that would have been generally unattainable to them had they tried to resolve their situations within the structures and institutions of the societies that they inhabited.

My objective with this NEH grant is two-fold: first I want to round out and complement the research I have done to this point through a systematic examination of a broader range of more general documents that treat the experiences of converts to Latin Christianity in the early modern era. The primary focus of my research will be in Venice in the wonderful, but little-utilized IRE (Istituzioni di Ricovero e di Educazione) archive. The IRE is modest in size, but contains a treasure-trove of documents related to the pious and charitable institutions of the city of Venice, such as its hospitals, hostels, asylums, and most interestingly for my purposes, the

archives of Casa dei Catacumeni, the House of the Catechumens. The Catechumens' house in Venice was established in the mid-sixteenth century as a support institution in which converts from Islam, Protestantism and Judaism could be housed, re-educated and supported until they were ready to enter into Roman Catholic society and life. During the centuries of its existence, thousands of individuals, including not insignificant numbers of women, passed through its doors on their way to new lives as Christians.

My research will focus on the IRE's series of notarial registers from 1557 to 1769 which lists all the individuals who were housed in the Catechumen house, as well as details of their lives both before, during and following their residence. I intend to work through these registers, around 25 in number, looking specifically for women and children who entered the house. In addition to the records in the IRE archive in Venice, there are excellent collections of Catechumen documents in Rome and Turin, respectively in the Archivio storico del Vicariato di Roma and the Archivio della Curia Arcivescovile di Torino. These archives, long neglected by scholars, have only recently become the focus of more encyclopedic rather than analytical study by W.H. Rudt de Collenberg and Domenico Roccio, and neither of these scholars has treated the experiences of women in the houses of Catechumens.

My objective in examining the records of the Catechumens is to develop a broader, more statistical, picture of the women who inhabited the houses. I want to identify who they were, where they came from, and especially what drove them to cross their own boundaries. The product of this final element of my project will be crucial in lifting the three detailed case studies I have found from the realm of what some might consider to be curious exceptions. A secondary objective of this research will be to illuminate and analyze the experience of the women who occupied the Catechumen houses, which has not been treated to this point.

Once I have completed this final stage of research, my second objective is to transform this research and several shorter pieces based on it (which I have already presented in a number of venues) into the first draft of a book on gender and boundaries in the early modern Mediterranean. I have already presented this project to my editor at Johns Hopkins University Press, who has committed to publishing the book upon its completion. The work will be divided into four chapters: the first three chapters will contain in depth treatments of each of the three case studies I have briefly discussed here. The final, and most challenging chapter will be based on the

research I hope to accomplish with this grant. It will situate the previous case studies within a larger base of examples, and will propose explanations and generalizations about the larger questions suggested by the three individual examples. These include questions about the place of religion in Mediterranean women's identity, the motivations and experience of both male and female conversion, and the ways in which women's experiences on the frontiers between Christendom and Islam suggest some of the mechanisms available in this unique region that allowed them to subvert the social, cultural, religious and political structures of early modern Mediterranean societies.

In conclusion, I believe that this project presents a number of promising possibilities. By bringing questions of gender to bear on the current dialogue on renegades, I hope to cast light onto an unexamined aspect of this phenomenon and to complicate its present, essentially male vision. In addition, I believe that this study, by moving from a strictly European or Muslim focus, will illuminate the understudied experiences of women who navigated the boundary regions of the Mediterranean. And finally, this study will clearly fit into the lively scholarly dialogue on early modern women, religious identity and the dialogue on women's agency. While much has been written on this last score, I believe this study comes at this issue from a unique geographical and cultural angle and brings to the discourse the dimension of women's use of religious and political boundaries as a part of their strategies and avenues of expression and assertion.

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